

A COMMUNITY APPROACH TO ADDRESSING GANGS

By

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Gangs and gang violence have once again become an issue of concern to many citizens. Traditionally law enforcement officers have been tasked with addressing the gang problem through suppression. As our society becomes more aware of gang related issues, more resources are being directed to address the problem of gangs.

Over the past five, or more, years, it has become apparent that suppression alone will not solve the gang issue. Likewise, the law enforcement community alone through suppression has been unable to stem the growth of gangs and eliminate their activities and violence. A better method must be found and implemented. The model most discussed includes intervention, prevention and suppression. As part of that model the issue of re-entry or re-assimilation into the community has to be discussed.

The prosecutor's office has the opportunity to take the lead in spearheading a comprehensive community model of gang awareness. That model may initially take the prosecutor outside of the traditional role. As many prosecutors' offices around the country adopt the Community Prosecution concept of case and office management, the gang prosecutor's role in this evolution becomes critical. The community/gang prosecutor has the opportunity for true collaboration and information sharing with the entire community. This prosecutor, or team of prosecutors, has the opportunity to become a repository for information. They have the ability to obtain information from a concerned community and disseminate that information to entities that are able to provide services to at risk individuals. The prosecutors' through their governmental and community contacts have the ability to direct those individuals who are concerned, or need services, to the right entity.

The prosecutor's office can begin to address the communities' issues by developing a gang response model. The components of this model may include:

1. Assessment

Before anyone can discuss a communities gang issues, an assessment has to be made to determine the extent of the problem in the community. This assessment can not be done solely from behind a desk. The prosecutor has to get out into the community and literally walk the streets. On the streets the prosecutor will see the extent of decay. Applying the broken window theory of

policing and prosecution, the prosecutor can work with the community and local governmental entities to address certain problems.

The presence of gang graffiti in the neighborhoods is a clear indication that gangs have begun to infest those areas. Also, the presence of gang graffiti near or in school buildings supports a conclusion that the gangs are in the schools, and if so, are recruiting in those schools. Reading that graffiti will allow the prosecutor to determine if a gang war is occurring or is about to occur. Speaking with the local citizens, those people who live in the community whose lives are affected everyday by street activity will give the prosecutor an idea of how the community perceives what is occurring in the neighborhood.

2. Action

Once the assessment is made, the prosecutor, along with community and law enforcement partners, can determine what actions need to be taken. The extent of gang activity already existing may control the depth of the plan implemented. At the very minimum a gang awareness program needs to be implemented to bring to the attention of the community the issue of gang violence. Community leaders and politicians may look at task forces or commissions to study the problem and return a written report with recommendations. Police departments may designate a gang unit within the agency to target gang activity.

Whatever the action taken, the stakeholders must realize the plan has to be both flexible and enduring. There are neither quick solutions nor quick fixes when it comes to dealing with gangs. Too many times in the past a decision has been made to declare that the war has been won (both with gangs and with drugs). This declaration has most often resulted in the disbanding of the entity charged with overseeing the program designed to combat the problem. The end of the program has resulted in an increase in the problem.

3. Organization

When we believed that law enforcement alone could solve the gang problem, it was only the police who were present at the table to discuss solutions. As the gang problem has grown, and become more sophisticated, we have come to realize there are other stakeholders that must be included in the discussion of solutions.

The community/gang prosecutor is in the unique position of knowing the stakeholders in the effected area. Those stakeholders include community activists and the faith based community, as well as government agencies and not-for-profit organizations. No potential partner should be excluded from the initial discussion regarding assessment and action.

4. Collaboration

Collaboration is crucial to the organization of the community to begin to acknowledge and then address the gang problem. By bringing all of the stakeholders to the table and giving them a voice, the stakeholders gain a sense of empowerment, a sense that they are contributing to a solution rather than being dictated to. This allows for a buy-in by all partners, allowing them to return to their constituent base with a positive message of commitment.

5. Community

Just as law enforcement can not do it all, government agencies can not provide all the resources needed to address the gang issue. Within the community other organizations may, and probably do, exist that have the ability to provide necessary resources. Faith based groups are traditionally community based. They draw from the local neighborhoods, thus intimately knowing their parishioners and the problems within the community. These faith based groups often times have programs designed to help their parishioners, thus helping the community at large. In addition to the faith based community, local schools often have counselors, and others, who can direct students and families to resources that can address health and mental health issues, employment, and social services.

6. Program Aspects

There are numerous tested strategies implemented by other communities. These strategies ought to be reviewed prior to a “re-inventing the wheel” approach to community/gang prosecution. The American Prosecutors Research Institute and the national District Attorney’s Association have spent several years helping to develop programs that are working. Each community can take an existing program and adapt it to the specific needs of that individual community. In order for a program to be successful all needs must be considered. Prior to implementing a community/gang prosecution program people such as the police chief, commanders for the police districts, sheriff, representatives of all major law enforcement agencies, county executive, members of the county counsel and members of the board of education, school superintendent and principals, the heads of social service agencies, business leaders, community groups, faith based community organizations and citizens need to be sought-out, met with and asked for their perspective regarding the gang issues in their community. Their suggestions have to be taken into consideration and they need to feel like contributing partners to bringing community/gang prosecution to their communities. The whole community must understand community/gang prosecution before it can be successfully implemented.

7. Measurements

The goal, the objective, is to reduce the impact of gang crime in the community. There have to be ongoing objective measurements to assess the impact on the community of a successful community/gang prosecution effort. The traditional quantifiable measure is to record the number of successful prosecutions, and show statistical decreases in crime. As accurate as this method may be, it fails to account for a reduction in crime through awareness programs, outreach programs, mentoring programs and other direct contacts with at risk youth that may influence a future choice of those individuals. An accounting of the investment of time of the participants showing numbers of youth they have interacted with, referrals they have made, programs they have presented will show the positive influence that has been brought to the community. To avoid problems, the assessment should be undertaken by a third party not involved with the services being provided.

Conclusion

Citizens want their communities to be safe and crime free. Although there is no such thing as a crime free community, it is an essential goal of a prosecutor's office to reduce crime within the community. Traditional "lock-em-up" approaches are usually temporary in nature. Once a sentence has been served defendants reemerge into and re-enter the community. The community must be prepared for these individuals home comings with alternatives to the temptations that initially took them from the community. Working together with the community stake holders, the prosecutor's office can take the lead and set a standard for successful gang awareness and prevention.

Jeffrey T. Wennar has been practicing law since 1979. He began his legal career as an Assistant State's Attorney in Prince George's County, Maryland. Mr. Wennar joined the Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office in August 2001 as the Gang Prosecutor, and brought an expertise on gangs, and especially gangs in Maryland, to this position. In 1993 Governor Schaefer appointed Mr. Wennar to the Governor's Executive Advisory Council requesting him to study gangs in Maryland. As a result of that study, the Governor was presented with, "A Report on Gang Violence in Maryland," written by Mr. Wennar and other members of the study group.

Mr. Wennar has taught at local and state police academies in Maryland and Virginia; has participated in numerous gang awareness presentations on behalf of the Maryland Police and Correctional Training Commissions; and, has lectured to many legal, civic and educational groups.

In 1995 Mr. Wennar was recognized by Federal Bureau of Investigation Director, Louis Freeh, for his successful prosecution of the Hester drug gang. In 2003 he received the prestigious Frederic Milton Thrasher Award, from the National Gang Crime Research

Center, for superior community service. He received the Thrasher Award again in 2004. He has had previous articles published in the Journal of Gang Research.

In addition to his prosecutorial duties, Mr. Wennar is an Adjunct Professor at American University where he developed and teaches a course on Gangs and Gang Violence in America. He has been an Associate Professor at the University of Maryland University College and at Montgomery College.